

AYSO Region 13's Guidance, Interpretations & Modifications for 12U Referees on the Laws of the Game

[Revised Aug, 2023]

AYSO Region 13 strives to make soccer safe, fair, and fun for players of all ages. The 12U modifications and guidance are designed to provide an age-appropriate soccer experience for players as they move from the non-competitive younger divisions toward full-size soccer. At 12U, play is governed by FIFA's Laws of the Game ("LOTG"), subject to the modifications below.

Law 1 — The Field of Play [reduced in size]

The goals and fields provided for 12U are larger than used in 10U, but usually smaller than regulation. Fields should be played as marked. Goals are usually about 7 feet high and 7 yards wide. (On some fields, full size goals may be used.)

Law 2 — The Ball [size 4]

12U plays with a size 4 soccer ball. The ball should be pumped firm to the touch. (Thumbs pressed into a panel should depress that panel, but not cause adjacent panels to depress.)

Law 3 — The Players [9 v. 9]

Nine players are on the field at a time (including one goalkeeper). A team must have six eligible players (including the goalkeeper) on the field to start or continue a game. It is up to the referee as to how long the game may be delayed waiting for the minimum number, but more than ten minutes is likely to make the game run late.

Law 4 — The Players' Equipment [safety first]

The no-jewelry mandate is to be **strictly enforced** for safety — no earrings, no bracelets (includes friendship bracelets, rubber bands, silly bands, etc.), no necklaces, nothing metal (includes bobby-pins) or hard in the hair, etc. **New rules in 2023** allow for beads in the hair, but they must be securely fastened to the head and cannot present an increased risk to the player, teammates, or opponents. Med-alert bracelets or necklaces are the **only** exception but should be taped down or otherwise secured for safety. There are **no exceptions**. (This is from Law 4 of the IFAB Laws of the Game; it is not just an AYSO rule.) Casts and splints may never be worn, nor may a player remove a cast or splint to be eligible to play — safety first. Prescription eyeglasses may be worn; non-corrective sunglasses may not.

While cleats are recommended, they are not required. Tennis shoes or other closed-toe shoes the referee considers safe are permitted.

Shin guards are mandatory and must be worn under the socks. It is not permissible to put the shin guards over the sock and roll the sock down over the shin guards.

Referees should permit reasonable clothing for warmth — with the uniform shirt on top (any hood must be tucked into the shirt).

Law 5 — The Referee

[New in 2023] Each game is officiated by one referee (on the field with the whistle) and two assistant referees ("ARs," who have the flags and work the touchlines). For Region 13 12U regular season games the home team supplies the referee to the game before their own team's game, on the same field (the home team of the first game of the day does not have a referee assignment). The visiting team on the second-to-last game on a field supplies a referee to the last game on the field. Assistant Referees (ARs) are provided by the teams playing, for their own game. Each AR should work the opposite team's touchline, not their own team's touchline. Note that all three officials must have a Regional or higher AYSO referee certification level.¹ Referees for 12U are strongly encouraged to take the Intermediate Referee course. (Details can be found on the AYSO Region 13 website here: <https://ayso13.org/referee-scheduling/>.)

Play should be stopped immediately for serious injuries. While referees at this level are encouraged to be generous in deciding when an injury is serious, they are also encouraged to be aware that an immediate stoppage may not be necessary for minor injuries, especially when the opponent of the injured player's team is advancing toward the injured player's goal. Some balance is required to assure the safety and treatment of an injured player. Play should always be stopped if, in the opinion of the referee, play is moving toward the injured player and could threaten the safety of the player. Coaches should be called onto the field to check on the player as needed. Coaches must not enter the field unless beckoned by the referee. Coaches on the field for injuries should not be discussing the game with other players or complaining to the referee.² If play is stopped for an injury, play is restarted with a dropped ball. All dropped balls are to a single player with all other players (from both teams) at least 4 meters (4 ½ yards) away. If the ball was in the penalty area or was last touched in the penalty area, the ball is dropped to the goalkeeper, regardless of the team which last touched the ball. Otherwise the ball is dropped to a player of the team that last touched the ball before play was stopped.

Parents and other spectators are not allowed behind the goal line and should be at least two yards behind the touch line (the sideline) to avoid interfering with play, and, if possible, located between the tops of the two penalty areas. In Region 13, the home team and parents should be on the north or west side of the field; the visiting team on the other side of the field. Coaches should remain at least one yard behind the touch line and should remain within the technical area (i.e.

¹ If three properly certified referees are not available, a non-certified person may be a club assistant referee. The club assistant referee only assists the referee with ball out of play (not fouls or offside). If no Regional (or higher) referee is available, no game may be played. (Teams may use the field to practice or scrimmage if they wish.)

² Referees are strongly advised to avoid such conversations by moving away from the injured player immediately upon beckoning the coach onto the field.

within ten yards of the halfway line — the center circle is a good guide for this measurement). Coaches are ultimately responsible for their sidelines and should ensure that they are appropriately positioned and behaving. The coach may ask the referee for assistance should they be experiencing any difficulties managing their sideline.

Law 6 – The Other Match Officials [Assistant Referees]

Reminders and hints for assistant referees:

- Stay with the second to last defender, the halfway line, or the ball, whichever is closest to the goal line in order to be in position to flag for offside.
- Mirror the referee’s throw-in signals for your touch line and for goal kick/corner kick signals at your goal line.
- Each assistant referee keeps a game card and tracks substitutions for their side of the field. The assistant referee should inform the coach if a player has been out for more than one quarter to aid the coach in ensuring each player plays three quarters. But note that the referee team does not enforce Region 13’s three-quarters playing requirement; the referee should report violations on the back of the game card so that the Region can address the issue with the coach. Similarly, the assistant referee should watch that no player has played more than two quarters as the goalkeeper.

Law 7 – The Duration of the Match [30 minute halves]

- 12U plays 30-minute halves — running time. The clock does not stop at any time except during halftime.
- The LOTG gives the referee discretion to add time if time is lost due to an injury or a team wasting time; Region 13 asks that referees use this discretion only if the game will still end on time. Ending on time means ending so that the next game can start on time.
- Approximately halfway through each half (ideally after about 14:00 or 14:30 minutes so that the “quarters” are roughly equal), when the ball is out of play, the referee will allow for substitution.³ The clock runs during the substitutions. The substitution is not a “time out” or coaching opportunity, but a break for substitutions — it should be very brief.⁴ On very hot days, referees must make sure the players have enough time to get water, but still avoid excessive delays.

³ Occasionally a game does not seem destined to have the ball leave play; in such cases, the referee may stop play, preferably when the goalkeeper has the ball, and restart play with a dropped ball.

⁴ Players may get water during the substitution break — but they may also come to the sideline and be handed water (bottles should never be thrown on the field) at any time during the game as long as they stay on the field. The referee, however, will not delay the restart of the game while they do so.

- Games must end on time.

Law 8 – The Start and Restart of Play

The team winning the coin toss picks either (1) the goal to attack (in which case the other team kicks off in the first half), or (2) to kick off (in which case the other team gets to choose the goal to attack).

The ball must be kicked and move (at least a smidgen) in any direction on the kickoff. Players from both teams must be on their own half of the field, except the kicker, who may choose to be on the other side to kick the ball backward. The team opposing the kickoff must be entirely outside of the center circle until the ball is kicked. Retake the kickoff if not taken properly, as many times as necessary.

The player taking the kickoff (or free kick, goal kick, corner kick, or throw in) is not permitted to touch the ball again until touched by another player from either team. If the player does, award an indirect free kick at the place the ball was touched a second time.

Law 9 — The Ball in and out of Play

The whole ball must cross the whole line - in the air or on the ground - for the ball to be out of play at the goal line or touch line.

Law 10 — Determining the Outcome of a Match [Scoring]

The whole ball must cross the whole line, in the air or on the ground, for a goal to be scored. (Tip: A team may score a goal against the other team directly from a direct free kick, kickoff, goal kick, or corner kick, but not from a throw-in or indirect free kick. A team may not score against itself on any restart unless the ball is played by or touches a player from either team before going in the goal.)

Law 11 — Offside

Offside is fully enforced according to the Laws of the Game and is the primary responsibility of the Assistant Referee. As FIFA instructs, offside is judged by a player's position at the time the ball is played by or touches a teammate. An offside infraction only occurs upon a player's active involvement, which generally means either contact with the ball or interfering with an opponent. The free kick for offside is taken from where the active involvement occurs.

Law 12 — Fouls and Misconduct

The fouls listed in Law 12 apply. A few tips for referees on common issues:

- Deliberate handling of the ball with the hands or arms — unintended touches of the ball or moving the hands to instinctively protect the player are not deliberate and therefore are not infractions of Law 12 unless the inadvertent handling results in a goal or scoring opportunity. It can be helpful for the referee to call out “no foul; continue play” or “not deliberate, keep playing” if the ball touches a player’s hands or arms but is not an offense. A useful consideration for referees is: did the player play the ball or did the ball play the player?
- Kicking (or attempting to kick) an opponent — a careless kick of an opponent is an offense and should be called.
- Tripping (or attempting to trip) an opponent — often occurs when a player misses the ball and instead trips an opponent.
- Pushing — often occurs when a player reaches out with an arm and pushes an opponent away.
- Holding — may take place when a player grabs an opponent’s shirt in trying to get the ball; also may occur when a player shielding the body unfairly uses his or her arms to keep an opponent away.
- Goalkeeper handling limitations — a goalkeeper may not use his or her hands if a teammate has (1) deliberately kicked (with the foot; this does not include the shin, ankle, etc.) the ball to the goalkeeper or (2) thrown the ball to the goalkeeper on a throw-in. It is not an offense if the ball was miskicked or deflected by the defender or is cleared in such a manner that the goalkeeper happens to become able to play the ball. It is also not an offense if the goalkeeper attempts to kick the ball away, miskicks the ball, and then picks up the ball. At this level, only obvious breaches should be whistled.

Heading Ban: As a safety precaution, AYSO prohibits intentionally heading the ball at this level. If a player intentionally hits the ball with his head, an indirect free kick is given to the opposing team.

Cautions and send offs: Misconduct in Region 13 12U games is rare. When it occurs, try to deal with it without showing cards to players, if possible. As the coach is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the players, strive to work with the coach to address conduct issues. It is permissible to show a card to a coach, if that coach has not acted in accordance with AYSO’s philosophies in support of the safe, fair, and fun principles. It is highly recommended that the referee speak with any difficult coach initially and only use the cards as a last resort.

Law 13 — The Free Kicks [how play is restarted after fouls or offside]

The player who takes the free kick may not kick it a second time until another player from either team touches or is touched by the ball. The ball is in play once it is kicked and moves.

All opponents must be 8 yards (for 12U) from the spot of the kick. A teammate may be closer, and the ball may be passed to that teammate. If the referee needs to move defenders to 8 yards, the referee should blow the whistle to tell everyone the kick may be taken.

If a defensive free kick is taken from inside the penalty area, all opponents must be outside the penalty area until the ball is kicked.

All free kicks take place at the spot of the foul, except:

- If a defender is fouled inside the defensive goal area, the ball may be placed anywhere in the goal area for the free kick (just like a goal kick).
- If an indirect free kick foul by the defending team occurs inside the goal area, the attacking indirect free kick takes place from the goal area line parallel to the goal line at the point nearest to where the foul occurred (and defending players must be either 8 yards away or on the goal line between the goal posts).
- A direct free kick by the attacking team (foul by the defending team) may never take place in the attacking penalty area: if a direct free kick foul occurs in the penalty area, a penalty kick is awarded. The referee signals a penalty kick by pointing at the penalty mark.

Law 14 – The Penalty Kick [when a direct free kick foul occurs in the penalty area]

If a direct free kick offense occurs to the attacking team in the penalty area, a penalty kick is awarded. 12U penalty kicks are taken from 10 yards. All other provisions of Law 14 apply. Referees are encouraged to explain the penalty kick guidelines to players before the kick, as they are likely to be unfamiliar with penalty kicks. In particular it may be useful to explain:

- The ball may not be kicked until the referee blows the whistle (if it is, it must be retaken as the ball was not in play — regardless of what happened).
- The goalkeeper must start on the goal line and may move sideways but must keep one foot on or over the goal line until the ball is kicked. If the goalkeeper comes forward and saves the kick or distracts the kicker, the kick is retaken. (The assistant referee should watch for this.)
- The kicker must be designated before the kick and must be the one to kick the ball. (If a penalty kick is to be retaken, the team may change the kicker.)
- No player from either team may enter the penalty area or penalty arc “area” until the ball is kicked and moves forward.

Also remember on penalty kicks:

- The kicker may not touch the ball a second time before it is touched by another player: if it rebounds from the goal and the kicker kicks it again, award an indirect free kick to the defense. (Note: if the kick bounces off the goalkeeper, then it has touched another player and the kicker may kick it again.)
- Neither half can end while waiting for a penalty kick to be taken. If time expires, the penalty kick is still taken, and the game or half ends immediately when the kick is completed. However, no player may kick in a rebound if time has expired.

Law 15 – The Throw-in [how play is restarted when the ball crosses the touch line]

The Laws of the Game are enforced. Referees are reminded, however, that the throw-in is simply a way of re-starting the game. Referees are encouraged to remember that trifling and doubtful violations need not be called.

Law 16 — The Goal Kick [awarded when an attacker last touches a ball crossing over the goal line]

Goal kicks are taken from anywhere within the goal area. The ball is in play on a goal kick when it is kicked and clearly moved; the ball need not leave the penalty area to be in play.

Law 17 — The Corner Kick [awarded when a defender last touches a ball crossing over the goal line]

Corner kicks are taken from anywhere within the arc marked at the corner of the field. If no arc is marked, the ball should be placed within a yard of the corner. All opponents must be at least 8 yards away from the corner arc when the kick is taken; of course a teammate may be closer. The player who kicked the corner kick may not kick the ball again until it is touched by a player on either team — if the player does, award an indirect free kick to the other team.

The Laws of the Game only have 17 Laws. But referees sometimes refer to “Law 18” which they talk about as the Law of common sense. Always use common sense and keep in mind the AYSO credo of safe, fair, and fun in making decisions.

You can ask questions about the Laws of the Game or other referee issues on the “Ask the Ref” page of the Region 13 website. <http://ayso13.org/referee/ask-the-ref/>